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Editorials

Uncle Sam - drug pusher

Acting FBI Director Patrick Gray declared the other day that a shortage of heroin on the street market has developed as a result of the government's crackdown on the drug traffic, "the most intensive drive this nation has ever directed against narcotics racketeers." This might be encouraging news were it not for the fact that while the FBI is trying to crack down on the drug merchants another federal agency has been aiding and abetting them.

A detailed report linking the CIA to the enormously profitable traffic in heroin is presented in the July issue of Harper's magazine. It was written by Alfred W. McCoy, a PhD student in Southeast Asian history at Yale, not as a journalistic expose but as a chapter in a Harper & Row book scheduled for September publication under the title "The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia."

It is a shocking indictment that McCoy presents in reciting how, as a result of direct and indirect American involvement, opium production in Southeast Asia is increasing and the export of high-grade heroin is flourishing. Most of the heroin used by American GIs in Vietnam has come from Laotian areas where the CIA is active, McCoy writes, and increasing amounts are being sent to the United States and Europe.

As part of the U. S. effort to bolster Southeast Asia against Communist inroads, the CIA has been working since 1959 with the Meo tribesmen of hilly northern Laos. In forging an effective guerrilla

army, the CIA built up the power of tribal commanders both militarily and economically. But by Laos tradition, economics is opium, starting with poppy farmers like the Meos and extending into the royal Laotian government.

One of the commanders of the CIA secret army, McCoy reports, is General Vang Pao, a major entrepreneur in the opium business since 1961. CIA operatives guided the building of airstrips to link his villages via Air America planes — which, naturally, soon were flying Meo opium to market. CIA and the U. S. Agency for International Development later helped finance a private airline for Vang Pao, who went on to open a heroin processing plant near CIA headquarters.

A year ago, President Nixon declared war on the international heroin traffic, and — under U. S. pressure — opium dens in Laos were shut by the hundreds. But, according to McCoy's report, neither U. S. nor Laotian officials are going after the drug traffickers. He notes that, according to a United Nations report, 70 per cent of the world's illicit opium has been coming from the Golden Triangle of Southeast Asia — northeast Burma, northern Thailand and northern Laos — "capable of supplying the U. S. with unlimited quantities of heroin for generations."

McCoy's conclusion: "Unless something is done to change America's policies and priorities in Southeast Asia, the drug crisis will deepen and the heroin plague will continue to spread."